

NSS warns against discriminatory new Catholic school in Peterborough

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The National Secular Society has urged Peterborough City Council not to approve plans to open a new discriminatory Catholic school in the east of the city.

The NSS has [submitted](#) evidence to Peterborough City Council calling on it to favour inclusive, secular alternative proposals to meet demand for local school places.

Proposed Catholic school: the details

A proposal to open a new voluntary aided Catholic school in the Hampton Water area was [submitted](#) to the council in November. Under this plan:

- The school will be allowed to select 80% of its pupils on a religious basis in its first year. It could potentially select up to 100% on that basis after that.
- The school will have an exclusively Catholic ethos which will "permeate all areas of the curriculum and underpin the school's work and objectives".

The proposal is in direct conflict with an alternative bid by a local academy chain to open a community ethos school at the same site.

If the city council rejects the faith school, the community ethos alternative would also be expected to open in September 2020.

NSS submission

The NSS's consultation response included a detailed critique of the faith school proposal and evidence in favour of the alternative.

The NSS's consultation response told the council:

- The school's "exclusive and all-encompassing religious ethos" would be "alienating and exclusionary for many families who do not share the school's faith".
- Qualifying statements in the proposal, which claims the school will "welcome children of all faiths and none", were "little more than platitudes".

The NSS also submitted a [selection of comments from Peterborough residents](#) who responded to a petition coordinated by the NSS's [No More Faith Schools](#) campaign.

These featured concerns about discrimination, the exclusivity of the school's religious ethos and the likelihood that children would have to travel further to school.

The coordinator of the NSS's No More Faith Schools campaign, Alastair Lichten, said Peterborough City Council should reject the "discriminatory, poorly reasoned and unsuitable proposal" to open a new voluntary aided faith school.

"The range of principled and practical arguments being made by local residents should carry more weight than the poorly made demands from the Catholic Church for the new school to be faith based."

Notes

- Voluntary aided (VA) faith schools act as their own admissions authority and are allowed to select up to 100% of their pupils on a religious basis.
- In VA faith schools 100% of running costs and 90%+ of the capital costs are paid by the state. In this case the local Catholic diocese's capital contribution comes from public funds, as the city council has an agreement with a major housing developer to provide the school building. The costs for this are being passed to initial house purchasers.
- VA faith schools are permitted to teach denominational religious education (inspected by the religious body that runs them, rather than Ofsted).
- VA faith schools can apply a religious test when hiring promoting or retaining any teacher (though in practice such discrimination is usually restricted to senior roles and RE teachers).
- Since 2010 the Catholic Education Service has refused government offers to fund the development of new Catholic academies because these would have a 50% cap on religious selection. Plans to allow up to 100% religious selection by funding voluntary aided schools instead were announced in May 2018.

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